DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 120 CS 503 614

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TITLE Elder Theatre: Positive Image of Aging and Forum for Intergenerational Communication.
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Summer Conference on Communication and Gerontology (Edwardsville, IL, July 22-24, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aging (Individuals); *Attitude Change; Childhood Attitudes; Children; Mass Media; Negative Attitudes; *Older Adults; Program Descriptions; *Readers Theater; *Speech Communication; Stereotypes; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Age Bias

ABSTRACT

If art, when defined by existential and phenomenological boundaries, promotes self-understanding, then the verbal arts in particular offer fully developed hypothetical analogues of humans in action. The need to find some measure of self-knowledge through art does not diminish with age, but the self-understanding promoted by the portrayal of the elderly in contemporary media is that the concluding years of life bring poor health, loss of income and love, closed-mindedness, and passivity. This image even permeates children's perceptions of the elderly, which research shows are extremely negative. Two studies, however, suggest that children will perceive the unique qualities of the elderly if they are given situational clues for the inference that the elderly are successful. Thus, Arizona State University has organized an Elder Readers Theatre group, which performs literature for young children, adolescents, and adults to promote positive images of the elderly and to allow self-understanding for the performers. Elder Theatre selects literature with highly organized positive and productively humorous descriptions of aging and with personae whose chronology is advanced but characterized by success, and which promote productive apprenticeship for the aging. The Elders Theatre also has established good conditions for extended periods of informal interaction between audience and performers. (HTH)

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ELDER THEATRE: POSITIVE IMAGE OF AGING AND FORUM FOR INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Elder Theatre: Positive Image of Aging and Forum for Intergenerational Communication

"Why do men live surrounded by their own images," Jean Paul Sartre (1963) complains; "My God, why must we also have portraits in our room, why must we see representations of ourselves in the theatre, why must we walk in the midst of statues which represent us, why must we go to the movies and always see ourselves again?" (pp. 131-32). We conduct our lives in the company of all these hypothetical persons, Sartre believes, because we are unable to take ourselves as objects. In a state of complete self-comprehensibility, Sartre asserts "you have lost the man, you have the insect" (p. 132). This is why human images abound, images in stone, paint, celluloid, magnetic tape, or images embodied in the live speech and flesh of dancers and actors.

Art, when defined by existential and phenomenological boundaries is the means to hold off subjectivity for the purpose of achieving some measure of self-understanding. Thus, it is more accurate to state that we are able to conduct our lives because we are in the company of hypothetical persons. Art is more than a ludic activity, more than an aesthetic pleasure pursued for its own sake; art promotes self-understanding. Particularly do the verbal arts offer fully developed hypothetical analogues of humans in action. And it is

especially worth noting that nowhere have I found evidence that the need to find some measure of self knowledge through art in any way diminishes with age. Verbal art appears to be a lifespan need, functional to language acquisition (Brown, 1973; Piaget, 1962), important for adolescent conceptual development (Vygotsky, 1962), and a contribution to positive self-reflection (Natanson, 1970).

Consider how this lifespan need for art is being met by the industry which has so vastly multiplied the opportunity and the audience for the perpetual replay of fictional humans in action, the mass media. If you are a female between the ages of 25 and 34 or if you are a male within the 35 to 44 age range, a ten year study (Gerbner et al, 1980) reports that more than half of television's prime time and weekend dramatic programming features analogues of yourself. If you are 65 and older, you will find analogues of your age group in only 2.3 percent of the prime time and weekend televison's dramatic offerings. Although this reduction of the 11 percent 65 and older persons to 2.3 percent of dramatic TV's fictional persons does imply that older persons are not interesting in their own right, even more serious is the message conveyed by the type of older person who is created. Gerbner et al report that "about 70 percent of the older men and more than 80 percent of the older women are not held in high esteem or treated courteously" (p. 45). Women, especially, are

regarded and portrayed as unsuccessful, foolish, and eccentric. If you are 65 and older and wish to view positive analogues of yourself on television, restrict your viewing to daytime serial drama. The soap opera world is overpopulated with characters 55 and up who are in good health, financially comfortable, and physically pleasing (Cassata et al, 1980).

This descent from prime time to day time soap only gives elder Americans more evidence of their loss of status, a loss reinforced by the infrequent appearance of older citizens in magazine advertisements (Gantz et al, 1980). Today's immense nonprint media audience thus is witness to the same kinds of attitudes about elders which have for so long dominated English prose and poetry. Shakespeare's description of typified age, "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything," seems kind in comparison to Robert Frost's individual description of "An Old Man's Winter Night" (1969) in which a farmer at the close of life is defeated by the very things he has nurtured all his life: "All out of doors looked darkly in at him." The relatively few recent plays and films which exhibit positive older characters hardly even begin to balance the majority of works which devalue elders. What kind of self-understanding is promoted by all this print and non-print art? The understanding that the concluding years of life bring poor health, loss of income and love, closed-mindedness, and passivity. This negative repertoire of art about older persons

overwhelmingly demonstrates the need for positive images of elders, elders who have accepted with good humor the attributes of age, elders who have chosen to take the responsibility for growing old.

The benefits of such positive elder fictional analogues would extend well down into all generations. Behavioral scientists have been maintaining for at least twenty years that "the perception of roles entered into in maturity is based upon early learning regarding these roles" (Hickey et al, 1968). Thus, everyone, whether they acknowledge it or not, is serving an apprenticeship for elderhood.

Again, if you are a female over the age of 34 or a male over the age of 44, prime time television offers you few fictional analogues of your age range and practically no preparation for your years of achievement. Kaluger and Kaluger affirm that "the overabundance of 'youth-a-mania' has done much to confuse the self-concept image and identity of middle adulthood" (1974, p. 268). The situation is even more grim for the youngest generations who have never lived without television's interpretation of reality.

One would hope, then, that literature created especially for children would escape the stereotyping of the aged common to mass media, but Ansello's review (1977, 1978)of the quantity and kind of older adults in children's books reveals that out of more than 600 books only 16 percent presented

older characters and more than 75 percent of the older characters have been assigned superflous roles and are referred to by the single label "old."

Indeed, some empirical studies of children's perception of aging and the aged confirm what would be expected from those raised in a society which avoids and devalues its oldest members: children believe that older adults are feeble (Hickey et al), children's negative perception of older persons increases with an increase in the age of adults (Hickey and Kalish, 1968), even though older persons are regarded as kindly (Hickey et al) and wealthy (Seefeldt et al, 1977), children view with repulsion the bodies of older persons, express no desire to interact with them, and express strong negative feelings about growing old themselves (Seefeldt et al). Weinberger (1979) found that children judged older persons to be the sickest, ugliest, and to have the fewest friends of all age groups. In this era of forced and early retirement, segregated housing, and high mobility, children lack the opportunity to perceive and to interact with older adults. The chances for interpersonal attraction between youngers and elders are slim. Stereotypes nourished by books and the media prevail.

Fortunately studies of children's perception of the aged and aging are not mutually conclusive. Two investigations provide evidence that children demonstrate positive perception

of elders under the following conditions: 1) when children are asked to write stories about elder subjects viewed in photographs, the stories, if stereotypic, are positive, Thomas and Yamamoto (1975) report. 2) When children judge pictures of young and older adults within the context of positive, neutral, and negative biographical descriptions, Stier and Kline (1980) report that no age bias is observed. The children in these two studies were assigned a more active role than the children in the studies which demonstrated their low esteem for elders. It may be that the necessity to infer the point-of-view of elders, to imagine, i.e., to try out, what it would be like to be old and to commit that imagined role to words on paper created a sympathetic bond between young writer and fictional elder. In other words, because children created elders' stories, a closer than usual, if temporary, proximity was established between the generations.

These two studies suggest further that if children are provided situational clues for the inference that elders are successful persons, children are given the opportunity to perceive beyond the wrinkles and the gray to the unique qualities of particular elders. It is the biographical sketch which lures the children into an active construal of the unique qualities of older subjects. Closer proximity then increases the chances for the recognition of shared attitudes and values, an intergenerational observation that greater homophily between

communicators leads to increased accuracy of communication (Rogers and Bhowmik, 1972; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971). Furthermore, the hypothetical situation which sustains fictional portrayal of elders does not involve high risk and may provide a safe environment for approaching and trying to understand alien older adults.

Active participation in perceiving literature about the experience of aging thus offers younger generations an important surrogate opportunity for understanding elders and for preparing for successful elder careers. If intergenerational communication cannot be achieved satisfactorily in today's real world, the hypothetical world of poetry, stories, and plays may be able to increase the proximity between young and old and increase young and middle generations' chances to realize that elders are not really so different after all. More to the point, younger generations can be assured that they themselves are not going to be radically altered when they achieve elder status.

What is required to counteract society's negative fictional and consequent real stereotyping of elders is a medium which presents elders in the act of trying to understand and trying to explain their collective experience for themselves and for others. The performance of literature offers a challenging opportunity to enter the worlds of personae and narrators

and to assume their fictive lives. If the personae and narrators are chosen on the basis of their vigorous promotion and exemplification of the values of elders and if the language which shapes these fictional personae is well crafted for luring and holding readers and audiences, then elder performers who become mutually implicated with such successful personae will offer a vigorous challenge to the prevailing aging ste reotype. The concluding portion of the present essay describes an applied communication answer to the issues and explantions advanced in the first portion of the essay.

In February, 1981, in Phoenix, Arizona, 14 individuals responded to a call for performers to begin an elder readers theatre group. Supported by Arizona State University's College of Public Programs and University Continuing Education, the group formed as a non-credit course. After two months of rehearsal and trial performances in elementary schools, a community college, and a senior center, Elder Theatre demonstrated that it had become what it had promised: a home for positive images of aging and a forum for intergenerational communication. Elder Theatre is now a permanent organization that is planning programs for four age groups: young children, middle-aged children, adolescents, and adults. A storytelling service will begin in winter, 1981. Plans are underway for an oral history project which will provide Arizona's eldest elders the opportunity to contribute their stories for a series

of live and broadcast public performances.

The foundation of the theatre we are building for elders' positive self-understanding is the type of person who responded to the call. A few of these persons had been in a school play but had put those rewards aside many years ago for the duties of family; now they are ready to begin again. Most of the elders had no prior experience. Our oldest member, 77, reports that he recently received such aclaim at his senior center after reciting the Gettysburg Address that he joined our group to continue his stage career. Helen Wagner told us that she came "to dare to step into the art of performing." Thus, a need to risk trying to be a fictional presence for others lies at the center of members' motivation to work together, a motive no different from anyone's desire to try to build a character or to tell a story well.

What is different about Elder Theatre is the desire so passionately expressed by Helen Harris: "I don't want anyone here to know anything about me. I want to start all over again and be whatever I want to be." Working together to build a collective image of positive elderhood, Elder Theatre needs to see its own reflection in the audience mirror. Unlike interpersonal communication, performers give audiences permission to gaze. (Indeed, audience gaze is a primary criterion of successful performance.) Invoking the rules of performance, Elder Theatre implicitly commands: "Look at us as we are now;

not as you expected us to be. Examine our bodies and our minds. Take us as we are." Elder Theatre needs its audience. Because the performers cannot take themselves as objects to more fully wonder at the strength of their new community reinforced and organized by literature, they need the self-understanding that comes in the form of audience feedback.

And they are successful performers. Their commitment to announcing and demonstrating the values of elder status brings such unsolicited remarks from children as: "You're not cranky." "They didn't even use a microphone." "I didn't know that old peo . . . elders were creative." Thus, Elder Theatre selects out persons who want to risk performance. Not everyone, whatever their age, cares to become the object of an audience's gaze. We did lose 5 elders who felt they would learn more in the audience. Elder Theatre has to meet universal expectations for good performance if younger generations are to be persuaded to look forward to successful elder status and if sister and brother elders in the audience are to accept Elder Theatre as a positive modeling influence.

Elder Theatre selects out personae who best promote the goals for self-understanding and productive apprenticeship for aging. For our first program we selected poems spoken by personae who exhibit three characteristics:

1. The persona is unique as well as advanced in years. These characters are active mentally and imply physical vigor.

2. The persona accepts and laughs at physiological aging. In "Leftover" by Harry Wood (1980), the speaker proclaims: "I want to order a new scalp./ This one's wilted drowsy. / My hairs have lost their hustle."
3. The persona or narrator wants to promote the values of aging or wants to promote elders' collective experience.

Elder Theatre is truly a rhetorical act, its message taking particular salience against the background of society's negative stereotype "old." First, Elder Theatre features persons who are advancing in years and who are eager to take the risk of performing. Secondly, we select literature which highly organizes positive and productively humorous descriptions of aging and selects personae whose chronology is advanced but whose most singular characteristic is success. Thirdly, Elder Theatre establishes good conditions for extended periods of informal interaction between audience and performers, particularly between literary selections and at the conclusion of the program. Few transitions between selections are planned so that the performers will have to take advantage of the situation and rely on each other to move to the next poem. My long-range goal for compiled scripts is to establish no order for the literature, letting the particular audience and situation dictate the program. Improvisation and dialogue with the audience is the rule, not the exception. When the performers are so close in years and

experience to the personae, the boundary between fact and fiction is not always clear. We use this unclear boundary to promote interpersonal communication.

Irving Satz told us that he came to Elder Theatre to "regain something I believe is missing." When Irving Satz looks out lovingly at the children to whom he has given permission to gaze at the accretion of his considerable years, there is no doubt that he has found what he needs. And equally there is little doubt that the alert and somewhat startled looking children with grins on their faces watching Irving Satz are collecting new information.

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